

# U.S. nervously re-examines its policy on Iran...

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WASHINGTON — Despite the Carter Administration's declared confidence that Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi will survive the crisis in Iran, American officials now believe that the next few weeks could provide the last chance for a peaceful resolution that would preserve U.S. interests there.

Since the widespread demonstrations on Dec. 10 and Dec. 11 that marked Ashura, the Shiite Muslim day of mourning, President Carter and his aides have made optimistic public statements. Privately, however, officials say they believe that the shah's survival depends on his ability to negotiate a political compromise with his adversaries, and that he must do it soon.

Also in the balance is the United States' policy of all-out support for the shah, a policy that is under intensive review and now subject to sharper questioning from within the administration than at any time since late last summer.

If the last year's pattern of fluctuating calm and conflict is continued, a major cycle of challenge and confrontation will probably break out late in January, when the ritual 40-day mourning period after the Ashura demonstrations has passed.

"There is now a period of time, perhaps only a few weeks, when there will be a chance for these efforts to succeed," an official said recently. "But there is a limit to that time. You could pick Jan. 19 or 20 as a deadline of sorts."

"Is it a critical period? Yes, I think you could characterize it as a last chance," the official said. "The more time that goes by, the fewer options there are left."

The U.S. role in the political maneuvering now under way in Tehran is less that of mediator or participant than anxious spectator. What is conspicuous, however, is that the U.S. Embassy is no longer the cheerleader for the shah that it was widely perceived to be only a few weeks ago.

## Wider contacts

Year-old instructions to Ambassador William H. Sullivan and his staff to establish contact with the shah's opposition are being implemented on a wider scale than before. Earlier this month, an experienced Farsi-speaking U.S. official was dispatched to Tehran to strengthen the embassy staff.

"So far, we've just listened," an official explained in describing the renewed U.S. effort to make contact with the bewildering array of Iranian political figures. Whether the Americans can successfully play a more active role is still undecided.

In brief, the present state of U.S. policy is almost a mirror image of the political confusion in Tehran during this period of last-chance negotiation. It is in flux, no longer wedded to a belief that the shah's way is the only way. And, for the first time, the administration is prepared to face a future without a Pahlavi on the Peacock Throne.

An important element in the current evolution in Carter Administration policy was a hastily drawn interagency report prepared more than a week ago by George W. Ball. That report, prepared in barely 10 days, gave greater weight to the growing consensus among middle-level officials that there can be no restoration of the shah as absolute ruler, even if Iran's military government restores order and economic stability.

Ball, a former undersecretary of state in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, was called in Dec. 4 as a special consultant by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser. He was asked to present a broad assessment of the future of U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf.

The Ball report still has not been distributed to the State Department's middle-level officials, among whom there has been growing dissent from the official policy of total support for the shah. The report was expected to be a counterweight to the policy options sent up to the top level from the specialists.

## Extensive review

Instead, it has proved to be a catalyst for the extensive review now under way, officials believe.

The top policymakers — Brzezinski, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, Defense Secretary Harold Brown — have yet to meet with President Carter to decide what the new U.S. policy will be. But the administration is now thinking what only a few weeks ago was unthinkable: What will happen if the shah leaves?

Consequently, it is now conventional wisdom in the foreign-policy bureaucracy that a negotiated settlement under which the shah would continue to reign, but not to rule, as a constitutional monarch "is about the best you could possibly hope for."

## Analysis

The uncertainty that characterizes administration policy toward Iran these days is also reflected in a resurgence of the interagency guerrilla warfare that breaks out in Washington whenever an accepted policy is threatened with failure.

"It's that kind of bureaucratic situation," remarked one official who has participated in the infighting of the past few months. "Accusations are made by one agency about the other, because when you're in a crunch situation, and it looks like things are falling apart, somebody is going to get the blame."

As a result, there has been a wealth of gossip, some of it making its way into the press, much of it ignored as unsubstantiated or contradictory, to the effect that the U.S. Embassy did, or did not, accurately report what was going on; that the CIA did, or did not, miss the boat; that human-rights zealots in the State Department did, or did not, undermine the shah's authority; that Carter's closest advisers were, or were not, yes-men for the shah.

"The fact is, everybody has been at fault in this one," was the rueful

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